

Emily Stone is the author of six festive romance novels, including *Always, in December* and *One Last Gift*. Her novels have been translated into eleven languages.

Emily has lived in many places over the years, including London, Wales, Cornwall, Germany and Mozambique, before finally settling down in Bristol, where she spends most of her free time with her two rescue ponies. Emily Stone is the pen name for Becky Hunter. She writes speculative romance under her own name and is also one half of co-author duo Ellis Hunter, whose debut fantasy romance is *Blood Bound*.

Emily loves connecting with readers. You can find her on Instagram at @emstonewrites – she'd love to hear from you!

By Emily Stone

*Always, in December*

*One Last Gift*

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*Counting Down to You*

# Counting Down to You

Emily Stone



*Chapter One*

I sit at my desk, looking out of the office window at a grey, gloomy London. I'm half listening to my colleague, Cal, reassure a candidate on the other end of the phone that twenty-four hours is not a long time to wait for feedback, and that he'll be in touch as soon as he's heard from the employer. The other half of my brain is concentrating on my audiobook, playing through the headphone stuck in my right ear, but I can still appreciate the way Cal is able to turn on the reassuring charm with a click of the fingers. I'm not surprised, though, when he hangs up the phone, rolls his eyes and mutters, 'Honestly.'

'A needy one?' I ask.

He yawns, rumpling up his hair – a shade lighter than my own dark blonde. 'It's a temp job, Ali. Why does she even *care* that much?'

'Well, presumably she needs the job.'

'Yeah, but it's honestly the most boring temp job you could imagine.'

I snort. 'That the line you're going with on the ad?'

He answers that with another yawn and a stretch, his pinstripe shirt – the designer one he saved up three months to buy because, to quote, ‘you’ve got to look the part in order to convince people you know more about finding jobs than they do’ – tightening round his collar as he does so.

I try to refocus my attention on my computer screen, and the email I’m supposed to be replying to. It’s from one of the companies I’ve been working with since I started here over six years ago, back when I was fresh out of university with a Social Anthropology degree and no real idea what to do with it. I’ve got bigger, higher-paying clients now too, but I like this company. They want to start advertising for a new role and are wondering whether to wait until the new year, given Christmas is nearly upon us.

This largely depends on how you define ‘nearly’, given it’s not even December yet. Though tomorrow it will be. My gut spasms uncomfortably with that thought. I focus on my audiobook to distract myself. It’s one I’ve already listened to multiple times, so it doesn’t matter if I tune in and out. I like the story well enough, but it’s the narrator I keep going back to. Robyn has such a brilliant way of bringing the story to life.

Had. Robyn *had* a brilliant way of bringing the story to life. Nearly ten months since my best friend died and I still catch myself thinking of her in the present.

I jump in my seat when someone taps my shoulder. Cal is standing above me, holding a long line of silver tinsel. I slide my headphone out of my ear.

‘It’s time,’ he says, lifting the tinsel for emphasis.

Thankfully, I’m saved from having to explain that I

don’t really feel like decorating the office by the arrival of my boss, Farah, who is coming back from her lunch break with, predictably, a paper bag from the most expensive salad bar in existence round the corner. I’m pretty sure it’ll be a mark of my success when I can afford to have one of their salads for lunch every day like Farah.

Farah glances at Cal as she shuts the office door. ‘Do we really need to be doing that?’ she asks, addressing the tinsel.

‘It’s Christmas,’ Cal says, as if explaining something incredibly obvious. ‘Of course we do. And I’ve bought advent calendars for us all.’ He moves back to his own desk, one down from mine, and reaches for a bag under it, producing five advent calendars – one for each of us in the office. Though we’re two down right now, one person off and the other still on a long lunch break, supposedly with a client.

My heart lurches at the sight of them. Another reminder of what tomorrow will bring.

‘What?’ Cal asks. He’s frowning at me – probably because I’m still staring at the cardboard calendars. ‘They were on offer.’

Farah shrugs off her red coat, hangs it on the coat rack just inside the door. Misty rain still clings to her dark-brown hair. ‘Hmmm.’

‘Oh, come on, don’t be a scrooge,’ Cal says. ‘It’s not like I have a whole lot else to do right now.’ Which is probably true. He mainly looks after temp and seasonal work, doing a lot with companies who recruit staff for ski seasons abroad, all of which was sorted months ago. ‘And by that,’ Cal continues, clocking Farah’s arched eyebrow, ‘I mean that I am an exceptionally hard-working and integral cog

of the machine, who will be getting back to some very important recruitment-based work immediately after I finish hanging the decorations and making this place look less depressing.'

Farah's lips, painted red as always, twitch. 'Good to know.' She turns to me with an assessing look. 'And you?'

I sit up straighter. Farah could probably compete for the 'world's best boss' title, but she has a very direct, no-nonsense stare. And she can be more than a little intimidating.

'Me what?' I ask.

'How are things work-wise? Is there anything you need help with?'

'Ummm . . . no?' I have no idea why I make it into a question. 'It's like Cal says – it's quiet at the moment, isn't it?'

Farah studies me out of dark, intense eyes, then jerks her head towards the interview room at the back of our small office. She clicks her way over to it on her heeled boots and I get to my feet, knowing I'm expected to follow.

Cal glances over from where he is attempting to stick the tinsel above the window. 'You're being summoned,' he says.

'Looks like.' I keep my voice casual, but – despite the fact I know, objectively, that I've done nothing wrong – I can't stop the squirm of anxiety as I follow Farah into the breakout room we use to interview new candidates. It's all glass, which wasn't hugely well thought out. It means some of the candidates get twitchy, thinking that they are being watched not just by the person interviewing them but by the rest of the office too. It also sometimes makes

things tricky if, for instance, our assistant – a girl fresh out of university who almost definitely has no interest in recruitment – tries to mime 'do you want a cup of tea?' when you are asking people about their five-year plans.

Farah takes a seat at the circular table, setting her salad down on top of it, and gestures for me to sit opposite. When I do, she leans across the table, like she wants to be able to scrutinise every inch of my face. For the first time in a while, I remember what it was like to be interviewed by Farah, what seems like a lifetime ago, and how nerve-wracking the whole experience had been. Only then, at least, I knew what the interview was for.

'So,' Farah says. 'How are you doing, Ali?'

'I'm good!' But I sound way too over the top, the way I almost invariably do when someone asks me this question. I try to tone it down to something more believable. 'I mean, you know, I'm okay.'

'No, you're not,' Farah says bluntly. I'm not really sure what to say to that statement – I can't work out if it's a criticism or an observation. Farah taps her nails, painted the same colour as her lipstick, against the table. Farah always manages to make me feel slightly frumpy, no matter how much effort I put in. 'It's December tomorrow.'

'Right,' I agree with a nod, still not sure where this is going.

Farah stops tapping. 'Didn't you and your friend have a tradition in December?'

The calendar, waiting for me at home. The memory of Robyn handing it to me from her hospital bed in January, a few weeks before she died, making me swear to complete it.

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'We did,' I say as evenly as I can. No point in lying about it, is there? Because the advent calendar Robyn gave me was not an ordinary one. Instead of chocolate, inside the little squares will be handwritten challenges, folded on little pieces of paper. Challenges that I'll have to complete, ideally before the new year but definitely by next December. I tried to explain it to Farah one year. Or, rather, I'd *had* to explain it to Farah, because Farah was the subject of one such challenge. *Be brave and ask your boss for the pay rise you know you deserve.*

I nearly got all the way through the challenge before nerves got the better of me and I started babbling, saying I was only asking because of this tradition with my friend. I got halfway through the explanation before Farah, thank God, held up her hand to stop me.

'I understand very little of what you've just said,' Farah had announced. 'But you do deserve a pay rise. Leave it with me. I'll sort it.' And that was that. One of the easier challenges, all things considered.

Now, Farah sweeps her long hair back from her face, then levels a look at me. 'Look, I'll cut to the chase. I don't think you should be in the office right now.'

I frown. 'You want me to work from home?' I'm thinking of my flatmate, Julie, who moved in earlier this year. We don't get on hugely well, and the reason it works is because we're on different shift patterns. If I start working from home, that whole system is going to crumble.

'No,' Farah says in the same blunt tone. 'I don't think you should be working at all.'

'I'm not sure what you... Wait.' Because an awful thought has occurred to me. 'You're firing me?' Panic

makes my voice high-pitched. 'I know I've not been as on my game as usual, but I—'

Farah holds up a hand. 'Relax. Of course I'm not firing you. You're brilliant at what you do. But I know this has been a tough year, and it's going to be an even tougher month. I don't think sitting in the office is going to do you any good, despite Cal's attempts to brighten the place up. So I think you should take a sabbatical.'

'A sabbatical,' I repeat, dumbfounded.

'Yes. Just for December. Your job will be waiting for you come the new year.'

I stare at Farah. This has got to be some kind of joke. A really bloody weird joke. Or a test of how much I care about my job, maybe? I haven't been as on form recently as usual, after all. I used to genuinely get excited about matching people with their perfect job, but this year I've struggled to work up the enthusiasm. Still, a test doesn't feel like Farah's style.

When Farah doesn't offer any more context, I shake my head. 'But I... I can't just stop working.'

'Of course you can. Your boss is telling you to.'

'But... I need to work. I need the distraction.' And it's true. Since I lost Robyn, my job is one of the only things that's kept me moving, giving me purpose, a reason to get out of bed. I might not be enjoying the job all that much, but it's better than the alternative.

'As Cal so astutely pointed out, there isn't much in the way of distraction right now. It's a quiet time, and this year seems quieter than ever.'

'But I—'

'This isn't up for debate, Ali. Spend some time with

your mum, maybe. Or go somewhere abroad. You've got holiday you haven't used up, so we can keep paying you.' Farah hesitates then adds, in a gentler voice than I'm used to, 'You haven't taken a break since Robyn died, and I think you need to.'

*Since Robyn died.* The words reverberate around my skull. It still hurts to hear it out loud. Hurts to think that she'd still be here, if she'd got the heart transplant she'd so desperately needed.

'Now, we can talk to HR if you want to,' Farah continues. 'HR' being a woman called Hilda with a fondness for fizzy cola bottles. 'Or are you going to listen to my good advice? You'll only lose the holiday if you don't take it.'

I can only sit there, staring like a bloody imbecile. Farah arches one dark eyebrow, expectant. And my inherent need to please Farah, to do what I'm told and be a good employee has me saying, 'Okay.'

'Excellent. That's decided, then. You can finish up for the day and hand over anything urgent to Cal, then I don't expect to see you here tomorrow.' Farah gets to her feet and, when I do the same, pulls me in for an unexpected hug.

'Take all the time you need, hmm?' Farah murmurs. 'None of this is going anywhere, I promise.'

I feel tears stinging my eyes. Because Farah is trying to help, because she has been so kind this whole time, but also because I know that all this is going to do is make me feel even more lost. Still, I pull away and give Farah a bright nod. If my eyes are shining, she doesn't comment.

'What's up?' Cal asks when I head back to my desk.

'I...' I glance around the office, as if that will give me the answers. Cal has managed to do pretty well with the tinsel already. 'I'm taking a sabbatical.' My voice is weirdly flat. It's the shock, probably. Even saying the word sounds ridiculous. *Sabbatical.*

'Oh? When?'

'Pretty much now, I think.'

'Now?' Cal's voice goes up an octave. 'Did I miss something?'

'Farah said...'.

'She's taking the time she needs,' Farah says firmly, moving to sit at her desk and finally taking her salad out of the bag. 'Now, for God's sake, will you finish hanging the bloody tinsel and sit down.'

Cal does neither of those things, instead coming over to me and pulling me in for my second hug of the day. I inhale his familiar smell of tobacco and mint. 'I'm glad,' he says into my neck. 'We don't need you around here anyway.' He eases back. 'Go do something fun. Or something soul searching. Just *something*.'

'But what?' My voice is barely a whisper. And in that moment I feel so damn pathetic it's almost unbearable. But what am I supposed to do? I don't want to go off on some grand sabbatical-type adventure alone – and, besides, I don't have anyone to go with. Adam dumped me a year ago. Robyn is gone.

'Well, I could probably get you some last-minute seasonal work somewhere,' Cal muses. 'You could be an elf or operate a ski lift or something. There are enough idiots making a prick of themselves or breaking their legs or whatever so I reckon I could get you in.' When I say

nothing, Cal squeezes my arm. 'Come on. Why don't we go for a glass of pinot after work? I'll help you come up with a list of ideas.'

'Yeah.' I swallow. 'Yeah, okay.'

I sit back down at my desk. But even though I know Farah is doing this to be kind I can't help but feel a little dejected, like I'm not wanted – or needed. There are plenty of people, I'm sure, who would jump at the chance of an unexpected break from work, but I am not one of them. I meant what I said to Farah: I need to keep busy.

I stare at my computer, at the email I'd been in the middle of when Farah had walked in, and try to focus on the immediate. I need to deal with anything urgent, put my out-of-office on, leave handover notes for Cal. I need to not think of tomorrow, and the calendar I'm supposed to start. It was going to be hard enough to go through it without Robyn. But now I have no job, nothing to hide behind – and absolutely no clue what to do next.

## *Chapter Two*

I wake to the sound of my flatmate coming back from her night shift. Usually, I'd be getting ready for work right now. Today, all I do is blink up at the ceiling. My head feels groggy from the many glasses of wine I drank with Cal last night, but I'd have to be a lot more hungover than this to forget what date it is.

The first of December. Not the anniversary of Robyn's death – she died mid-January – but still an anniversary of sorts.

I roll onto my side and reach for the advent calendar I've had propped on my bedside table since Robyn gave it to me. It is brilliantly homemade – you can order the stuff to make one online, I learned several years ago. This year, Robyn has gone for traditional red and green, with a reindeer on the front, the final square – number 24 – in the middle of the bright red nose. I used to love making these calendars, right up to last year, when I had to think of challenges for Robyn to do in the hospital, hating the fact that I was coming up with things that Robyn would be

able to do from the confines of her small, white hospital room.

We were in our second year of university, living in the same house together, when we first came up with the idea. I'd been sitting at the wooden kitchen table, ringed with water stains, Robyn padding around in her slipper socks and frayed dressing gown, making coffee for both of us.

I groaned, putting my head in my hands.

'Hangover or general bad mood?' Robyn asked, flicking on the kettle. 'Warning: if it's a hangover, I will be asking why I wasn't invited to the party.'

'It's *December*, Robyn.'

'Well observed.'

'We're going home in, like, a week.'

Robyn cocked her head, her brown curls spilling to one side. 'Awww, are you worried about missing me?'

I leaned back in my chair, immediately regretting it because this was the chair that had one of its legs bent out of shape, so it wobbled if you sat on it the wrong way. I huffed as I righted myself. 'It's just . . . I haven't done any of the things I said I was going to do this year. I haven't joined a sports team or lost any weight or been on a single date. Instead, I've managed to put *on* weight, the guy I tried to kiss at Halloween was definitely horrified and the closest thing I've got to anything resembling a sport is playing beer pong at that randomer's party.'

Robyn held a finger in the air. 'I am *sure* that beer pong is considered a legitimate sport in some countries.' I only wrinkled my nose. 'Ah, come on,' Robyn said, pouring hot

water over instant coffee in two mismatched mugs, then setting one down in front of me. There were many good things about Robyn, but coffee making was not one of them. 'It's not that bad. Let's do something Christmassy later, cheer you up. Oooh, like ice skating. I love ice skating.'

I took a sip of the coffee, grimaced. 'I can't ice skate.' I sounded like a petulant child. 'Besides, don't you have an essay to write?'

'Yeah, and what the hell is that about? I only came here for the performing-arts stuff – not to have to *write*.'

I snorted quietly, then got to my feet, picking up both our mugs and moving to the kitchen sink, then emptying the contents down the drain.

'What are you doing?' Robyn asked, voice full of outrage.

'I'm making us proper coffee. And then I'm going to get dressed and stop feeling sorry for myself.'

'Good. Because if anyone has the right to feel sorry for themselves it's me.'

'Because of the essay?'

'Exactly.'

That evening, after Robyn agreed to forego ice skating in favour of cheap alcohol and *Love, Actually* at home, she'd come into my small bedroom brandishing a bottle of wine in one hand and a piece of paper in the other.

The bottle of wine she set down on my bedside table. The piece of paper she dropped into my lap.

'What's this?'

Robyn only grinned as I picked it up and started to read. It was a list.

1. Throw out the scales.
2. Sign up for the netball team.
3. Ask out that guy from your lectures you keep staring at.

There were twenty-four things in total. Twenty-four, for the twenty-four days leading up to Christmas.

‘It’s an advent challenge!’ Robyn was bouncing on her toes, her heart-shaped face flushed with excitement. I loved that look. I miss that look. ‘You said you wanted to fulfil your resolutions, so here it is. Instead of an advent calendar, I give you a resolution calendar.’ She accompanied that statement with a grand gesture.

I looked back down at the piece of paper, feeling a smile pull at my lips. ‘You are too cute.’ And, really, wasn’t she just the best friend?

‘Oh, I know I am. But you have to actually do them. By Christmas. And I’ll be watching to make sure you do.’

‘Well, that sounds incredibly ominous.’

Robyn flicked back her curly hair. ‘It’s the actress in me.’

I scanned the list. ‘I’m not dying my hair blue.’

‘You said you wanted to change your hairstyle! And blue hair would match your eyes.’

I laughed as Robyn came to sit next to me on the single bed. ‘Well, if I’m doing this, then so are you. Am I allowed to come up with a list for you too?’

‘Totally. Make it good, won’t you?’

From then on, it became a tradition. We didn’t always manage to complete the challenges by Christmas, but we always did them before the next December rolled round.

And now, sitting on my lap, is the last calendar from Robyn I’ll ever get.

Instead of opening it, I put the calendar back on my bedside table. I can’t do it. Because, if I do, it will be like the beginning of the end, and when Christmas Day arrives that will be it. There will be no more squares to open. Robyn will be really gone, and I’ll finally have to say good-bye for good.

I make myself get up, shower and get dressed, knowing that if I stay in bed all day it will be a downhill slide. Cal ‘helped’ me last night by coming up with suggestions of things I could do on my enforced sabbatical, making me write them on the Notes app on my phone, the ideas becoming more and more ridiculous in accordance with the number of wines we’d drunk. These ideas included:

- Rent a cabin in the Scottish Highlands for a month and write a best-selling novel
- Go to Costa Rica and learn to surf
- Get a job as Mrs Claus in Lapland

I smile, imagining what Robyn would say. *I will totally come to Costa Rica with you. I’ve always thought I’d be a brilliant surfer.* Then the smile fades as I think of the many trips we’d planned to take together. Trips we’ll never take.

*Stop it, Ali.* I promised Robyn I wouldn’t do this, wouldn’t think of all the things that wouldn’t happen, but would focus on the things we *did* do. It’s easier said than done, that’s all. Especially today.

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Rather than looking up cabins in the Highlands, I head out of my flat and down the two staircases to the ground floor, figuring some fresh air will do me good. The stairwell always smells a little like weed, and there is a dim light constantly flickering overhead, despite repeatedly asking the landlord to sort it out with the maintenance team. The sun is only just rising outside, and there is already a trickle of commuters making their way towards Ealing Broadway station, noticeable by their suit trousers or black tights sticking out from beneath winter coats.

Robyn had been thrilled when we'd found this flat, less than a ten-minute walk from a tube station. Yes, it was zone 3 and if you wanted to get to central London it could be a bit of a nightmare sometimes, but there were plenty of places to go out for drinks or food right here, like a mini town on the outskirts of the city. Maybe I should have moved out of the flat instead of renewing the contract after Robyn died, tried to move on in some capacity. But at the time the thought of packing everything up and moving somewhere new had felt impossibly overwhelming. So I'm still here. Same job, same flat. No Robyn.

I head onto the high street, passing by an open coffee-shop door. I slip my phone out to call my mum as I walk. Since she got into yoga, she's always up early, like somehow the two go hand in hand. I'm thinking of Farah's suggestion that I spend some time with my mum, and it's not the worst idea, is it? Better than moving to Costa Rica, anyway. Mum used to live in Cambridgeshire, where I grew up, but she moved in with Graham, her new partner, just over a year ago and now she lives in Kent. I'm happy for her. When my dad left, right after I finished university,

my mum fell apart. It took a long time to pull herself back together, but since she's been with Graham she's been the happiest I've ever known her. Even if, for a while after Robyn died, she tried to hide that happiness from me, like it was somehow disrespectful.

'Hallo, love!' Mum exclaims down the phone. 'How are you doing?'

'I'm good!' I'm using the same overly enthusiastic tone I used with Farah yesterday, but I can't seem to stop doing it. I sidestep a commuter who is marching along at a brisk pace with his eyes glued to his phone.

Mum immediately launches into a story about the pub she and Graham went to last night and how they ended up getting a discount because the waiter got the order wrong. She's been doing a lot of this recently, talking non-stop, like she's afraid of what I might say if she lets me speak. She switches almost seamlessly to telling me all about a yoga retreat she wants to go to in Bali next year, after her instructor told the group about it. 'And do you know, I think I've convinced Graham to come with me. Bali! Can you imagine!'

I smile at the thought of her and Graham – a slightly overweight man in his sixties whose hobbies consist of gardening and darts – doing a downward dog on the beach in Bali.

'Anyway, I can't believe it's December already! Can you? Are things starting to wind down for you at work or is there a Christmas rush?'

The first question she's asked, and I find myself hesitating. But if I tell the truth, she'll only worry. 'Oh, it's always pretty quiet this time of year.'